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ABSTRACT

To make sense of unknown words encountered in their reading, children must relate what they read to their prior knowledge. It is important to use children's language in early reading instruction, through the use of language experience stories that provide children with a natural transition from oral to written language. Nursery rhymes may also be used effectively as a student's first "reader." Letter-sound correspondences should be taught in semantic and syntactic contexts that are already familiar to children; one successful method involves children in dictating sentences about pictures of objects whose names begin with particular sounds. As part of the reading program, teachers should read aloud every day and should provide time for independent reading, perhaps through the use of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading periods. Another aspect of the reading program is the development of independent reading strategies; children need to be exposed to a variety of strategies that will enable them to figure out unfamiliar words. Finally, writing is another essential component of a sensible reading program. Children can progress from dictating language experience stories, to dictating their own versions of well known stories, to writing original stories. (GW)

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BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION: MAKING SENSE OR NONSENSE?

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BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION:
Making Sense or Nonsense?

The sentence in the book read, "The little man was sad." Karen's attempts at identifying the word "sad" were especially insightful. At first she tried to "sound it out" by saying very slowly "ssss....ă....duh." Her immediate reaction to her own effort was, "That doesn't make any sense!" Karen then made significant use of clues on the printed page by re-reading the first part of the sentence and looking at the picture on the page. She applied the meaning gained from both of these sources and proceeded to make sense by inserting the word "sad" in place of "ssss....ă....duh." Satisfied with her own response, Karen went on to read the remainder of the story.

Karen's decoding strategy demonstrates that the tactics children employ in attacking unknown words are not haphazard. Rather, children attempt to make sense "of what is going on"; for:

> If there is to be any chance that they will learn. . . they must do this by relating the situations they find themselves in to prior knowledge. Anything they cannot relate to what they know already will not make sense; it will be nonsense. (Smith, 1975)

For Karen, "ssss....ă....duh" was nonsense because her "prior knowledge," insofar as reading instruction was concerned, did not include the sounding out of words. Instead, Karen's initiation into reading began with her own language, something that makes sense to her. She was involved, as were all of the children in our class, in reading instruction which focused on her "prior knowledge" i.e., language.

The Child's Language as a Basal Reader

Current literature points to the importance of utilizing the child's language in early reading instruction. If the child's language is rejected, then his greatest strength as he enters school is ignored. (Goodman, 1975) In contrast, if the child's language is incorporated into the reading program, then he can acquire and expand language in a natural and exciting manner "rather than rigidly and articificially, as is often the case with the highly structured phonically oriented, workbook-based system." (Pienar, 1977)

An unfortunate aspect of the aforementioned "structured system" is that the child's proficiency with his language is rarely taken into consideration. On the other hand, in applying a language-oriented program of reading instruction, the teacher recognizes that the child arrives at school as an accomplished learner and user of his language. He receives little formal instruction in acquiring this knowledge; instead, the child learns the various semantic and syntactic rules of his language by practicing his language, i.e., by listening and speaking. He then formulates, tests, and internalizes those rules which fit the language. An analogy can be drawn between this process of language acquisition and learning to read. A child can learn to read most effectively, not through rigidly sequenced instruction, but instead by reading. The assumption is that once a child is exposed to the written form of his language, he will come to develop (as he did in acquiring oral language) rules on his own which help him become a fluent reader. The development of these rules can be accomplished by feedback from a fluent reader, i.e. the teacher. Rather than being in

the form of interrupting and correcting, this feedback consists of assistance by the teacher when the child demonstrates a need. Feedback which is most helpful to beginning readers can be provided more readily through the extended use of their language. In this manner, the children's language becomes their own "basal reader" in that their initial interaction with print consists of sentences and stories that come from within themselves.

Language experience stories are crucial components of a sensible beginning reading program. They facilitate the child's making the connection between oral language and printed material and provide the child with the opportunity to rely more heavily on non-visual information (i.e. knowledge of prior experiences) than on the visual information (i.e. the print). Initially language experience stories are more practical when carried out with a group and later expanded to individually dictated stories. Experience stories need not be limited to topics introduced by the teacher (for example, bringing a rabbit to school for the children to see) but instead can be drawn from the wide range of experiences that children have outside of school. Young children take delight in describing their adventures on Halloween night or the toys they got from Santa Claus at Christmas. To incorporate these descriptions into the reading program, the teacher simply writes down what the child says and then provides him/her with the opportunity to practice reading the story.

Although children may then "read" the story from memory, they are in fact reinforcing many skills which are essential to reading but "are never taught" - fluency, identification of words and meanings

with minimum reliance of visual information, and efficient use of short-term and long-term memory. (Smith, 1975) Thus, language experience stories provide children with a natural transition from oral to written language. However, many printed materials that are familiar to the students can also be incorporated into the beginning reading program.

The Use of Nursery Rhymes

When selecting reading material that is part of the "prior knowledge" of most young children, teachers should consider using nursery rhymes. When printed in large type with pictures and a limited number of words per page (Figure 1), nursery rhymes can serve effectively as a student's first "reader." Initially the children read the nursery rhymes through assisted reading, a procedure in which the lines are first read by the adult and then by the child. (Hoskisson, 1975) Soon the rhymes can be read independently due to the predictable structures and the students' familiarity with the material. Reliance on this non-visual information enables the young readers to move smoothly from the oral form of language to the written form since they experience oral reading as fluent and expressive rather than as a word-by-word identification process.

What About the Alphabet?

Knowledge of letters and sounds is viewed by many as the critical first step in learning to read. However, for letters to make sense to young children, they must be put in the context of a child's "prior knowledge." Graphophonic clues are only one of the three cueing systems

JACK AND JILL

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.

Figure 1

that readers use, so why not teach this system in the context of the other two (semantic and syntactic), which are already familiar to the child?

One method which has been used successfully to incorporate all three systems is the Alphabet/Language Book. (Powers and Bobys, 1978) A separate book is made for each letter of the alphabet for each child. The students cut out pictures (6-10) whose names begin with a particular sound and then paste them in a book, one per page. The teacher writes the appropriate word beneath each picture. Then each student dictates a sentence containing the word, and the teacher writes down what is said. After sentences have been dictated for each picture, the child practices reading the book through assisted reading. When students can read all of the pages independently, they tape record their books.

Through the use of these books, the child's language as well as the letters of the alphabet are incorporated into the reading program in a meaningful way. In contrast, the presentation of the letters in isolation ignores the child's knowledge of his language and therefore can make the learning of the alphabet a more difficult and complicated process than it needs to be. The notion that children cannot begin formal reading instruction until they know all the letters and sounds is questionable. The Alphabet/Language books are but one component of a sensible beginning reading program, which should include a variety of opportunities for children to engage in reading.

Discovering the World of Books

In order to help create children who not only can read but who also want to read, teachers must introduce their students to good

children's literature. The reading of stories aloud every day is a critical component of the total reading program, as this activity provides important opportunities for children to expand their vocabulary and knowledge of the world. With effective questioning techniques, the teacher can also develop critical thinking skills by asking the students to interpret and evaluate the elements of the story (characters, plot, theme, etc.).

In addition, young children must have time to engage in reading on their own, even when they cannot identify many of the words in a book. Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) can be combined effectively with a sharing time to provide such practice in reading. Students look through and/or read a book for a set amount of time (between 5 and 15 minutes) without talking. After the silent reading, a few students (volunteers only) share their book with the others by telling about the story. Many children use the pictures to help them in retelling the sequence of events.

The teacher need not wait until all of the students can read before introducing USSR; children enjoy looking at books even if they do not know the words. The sharing time facilitates the development of oral language and comprehension skills and enables the children to learn early that reading is a "meaning-getting," rather than a word identification, process. When children acquire such an understanding of reading, they develop decoding strategies which make sense as they learn to become independent readers.

Developing Independent Reading Strategies

In many instances teachers convey the message to their students that there is only one way to figure out an unknown word. How often

have we heard teachers say, "Sound it out," every time a child encounters a troublesome word? In addition to being unreliable due to the number of "irregular" words in our language, sounding out is cumbersome and inefficient since it causes the reader to slow down considerably the pace of his reading. Although total abandonment of this tool is not advocated, we do believe that young readers should learn a number of techniques which are effective in preserving the meaning.

Pictures can provide beginning readers with valuable information and enable them to predict what the words will be. Such was the case for Karen, who was mentioned earlier; the expression on the man's face in the picture helped her identify the word "sad."

To assure that children attend to the meaning of the passage, the teacher can ask, "What word would make sense here?" or "What word do you think might fit in here?" Such questions force the child to draw from non-visual information in attempting to figure out the word. In addition, the teacher can cover up the unknown word and ask the student to read the remainder of the sentence. Frequently, if the sentence is read and then the child looks back at the initial consonant(s), s/he will be able to re-read the sentence with the correct word inserted. The choice which the child settles on can provide the teacher with valuable feedback about the child's understanding of the sentence or passage. Therefore, providing young readers with alternative methods for learning to read is imperative.

Children need to be exposed to a variety of strategies which will enable them to become independent readers. Emphasis must be placed on their "making sense" of the material they are reading instead of merely sounding out or word calling, with little or no attention to the meaning.

Each of the components which have been described thus far serve important functions in the beginning reading program. Children's language must be respected and incorporated as part of their first reading material by having them dictate stories. The alphabet should be introduced in a context that makes sense to the children, i.e. by the use of their language. And beginning readers need to learn a variety of techniques which will help them in figuring out new words. However, while each of these elements serves a vital role, when combined they do not constitute a complete reading program.

Creative Writing as a Tool for Reading

Writing is another essential component of a sensible reading program. Just as reading can be developed naturally by drawing from the child's language, the same source can be utilized for initial experiences in writing. Individually dictated language experience stories can provide a smooth transition to writing, as the child can eventually take over the writing previously done by the teacher. In classrooms where a low-risk, child-centered environment has been created, students will let their teachers know when they are ready to move from dictating to independent writing.

As children progress to more detailed stories, they can be introduced to the elements of story structure, including: sequencing (beginning, middle, and end), plot, theme, and characters. Knowledge of these concepts serves the students well in the writing, as well as the reading, of stories. If the teacher reads familiar fairy tales such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," the students can focus on

and learn the basic components of a story. Following the oral reading by the teacher, the children can be asked to write (or dictate) their own version of the fairy tale, accompanied by illustrations.

From well-known stories, children progress to writing original stories. If writing has been introduced as an enjoyable and meaningful experience, the children will look forward to the opportunities to create their own stories.

Developing the writing component of a beginning reading program is essential, as it gives children practice in an important communication skill. If children are provided with many sensible writing experiences, then the need for many workbook pages and ditto sheets, which are currently used, will be eliminated. The primary focus of writing as a "tool" for reading should be on requiring written activities which "make sense" to the students.

If teachers keep in mind what it is their children are trying to do as they are learning to read and write, then the reading program should reflect strategies which are child-centered rather than materials-centered. When we respond to what a child is attempting to do, we are more likely to provide reading instruction which makes sense, rather than nonsense, to the beginning reader.

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